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11 April 1985
FB 85-10016
MIDDLE EAST-9

Analysis Report

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Paul - interesting analysis

Current Directions in Iranian Foreign Policy

Foreign Broadcast Information Service

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Current Directions in Iranian Foreign Policy

Summary

Over the past several months Tehran has pursued a highly active foreign policy intended to overcome Iran's international isolation and expand ties particularly with Third World countries. Based on its frequently expressed "neither East nor West" principle of seeking economic and political independence from the superpowers, Iran has increased its trade ties with African and Asian nations and attempted to spread its political influence in Third World countries by propagating the ideas of its Islamic revolution as a model. An additional objective, gaining support for its side in the Gulf war, has had only limited success. While Iran has stressed the importance of "exporting its revolution," its leaders consistently reject charges that this involves terrorist methods.

Conflicting priorities are inherent in these policies that seek to expand trade and diplomatic ties while pursuing a proselytizing mission to spread the Islamic revolution. Accordingly, Tehran's heightened diplomatic activity has been accompanied by a public debate over the nature of Iran's relations with the outside world. The debate has continued despite a landmark speech by Ayatollah Khomeyni in October 1984 underwriting the stepped-up diplomatic efforts. A bill passed by the Iranian parliament in February, charging the Foreign Ministry with expanding Iran's diplomatic relations but also investing it with a revolutionary mission, seems designed to strike a compromise between the contending viewpoints.

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Current Directions in Iranian Foreign Policy

Tehran in recent months has begun to pursue a more outgoing foreign policy in an apparent attempt to overcome the isolation in which Iran has existed since its 1979 Islamic revolution. "At present, we have an active foreign policy," Prime Minister Mir Husayn Musavi said in an interview published in the Tehran daily *Ettela'at* on 17 December 1984. "We have tried to expand our relations with the outside world, and in this area we give priority to Third World countries."

One of the more visible indications of this intensified effort has been the readiness of top Iranian officials in recent months to make frequent trips



Prime Minister Musavi

abroad for bilateral meetings and to receive delegations from other nations on a regular basis. Prime Minister Musavi's 23-25 January visit to Nicaragua was one of the more noticeable manifestations of Iran's current diplomatic activities.¹ Iranian officials have also made visits to India and other nonaligned nations, East Europe, and Japan. In recent months Iran has hosted diplomatic and trade delegations from such countries as China, Yugoslavia, North and South Korea, and numerous countries in Africa and other parts of the Third World.

Iran's endeavor to develop its diplomatic relations has become a generally accepted government policy at least since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeyni declared his support for expanding relations with foreign governments in a 28 October 1984 address to Iranian diplomats gathered in Tehran. "Wherever you ambassadors and chargés d'affaires are, you must try to strengthen your ties," he said, declaring lack of ties with other governments to be contrary to Islamic precepts. In a 21 February 1985 speech reported by the Tehran daily *Keyhan*, President 'Ali Khamene'i reaffirmed Khomeyni's stand as official government policy. "The open-door policy, which was emphatically recommended by the imam [Khomeyni] a few months ago and was also explained in detail by political circles, is the firm policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," he stated.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry, however, has advocated increased diplomatic ties for more than two years. In February 1983 the ministry established an institute for training new personnel to serve in its missions abroad, particularly

¹ Musavi's visit is discussed in the FBIS *Trends* of 30 January 1985, pages 9-11.

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in Third World countries. In a 19 February 1985 address reported by the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Supreme Court Chief Justice 'Abdolkarim Musavi-Ardebili told the institute's first group of graduates that Iran is "bent on building an active presence in the world and it needs educated and committed people to act as envoys abroad. We do not want to be isolated."

The principal actors in extending Iran's diplomatic contacts have been Foreign Minister 'Ali Akbar Velayati, Prime Minister Musavi, and President Khamene'i. Majlis Speaker 'Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, an often outspoken commentator on international issues, rarely makes trips abroad, though he may meet with high-ranking foreign delegations visiting Tehran. Ayatollah Khomeyni confirmed the roles of the principal players in his 28 October 1984 address: "When the president of the republic visits several countries, and so do the prime minister and Dr. Velayati—as it is right that they should—then everyone understands that Iran has relations with the world."

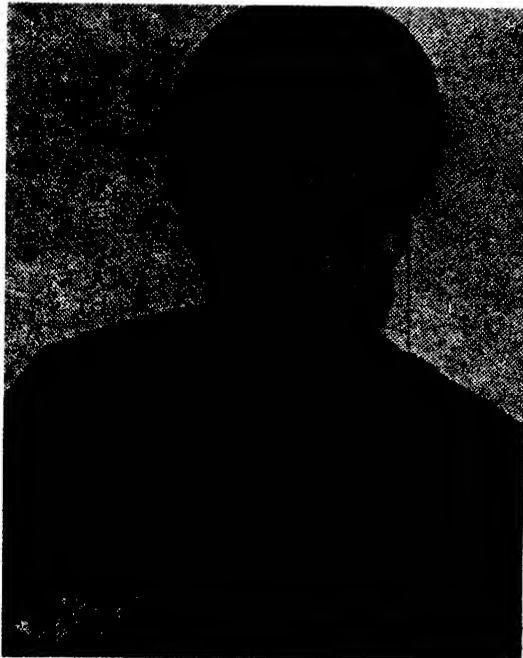
Third World Orientation

Iran's diplomatic activity has focused on Third World countries, reflecting a desire to achieve political and economic independence from the superpowers. This orientation also reflects Tehran's ideological mission of presenting its revolution as a model for peoples of the Third World, particularly in Islamic nations, and its desire to rally support for its side in the Gulf war. One measure of this Third World emphasis—a fundamental change from the predominantly westward orientation of Iran under the shah—was provided in an 8 January Tehran radio interview with a deputy of the Iranian Foreign Ministry. "In order to establish and expand political, economic, and educational relations with Third World countries," he stated, "the Foreign Ministry during the past two years has opened 15 new embassies in various countries in Asia and Africa and two embassies in Central and South America."

Iran declares the fundamental principle of its foreign policy to be "neither East nor West"—a formula signifying rejection of alignment with either of the superpowers but generally an open-door policy toward the rest of the world. Speaking to Iranian diplomats at a 23 October 1984 gathering in Tehran, Foreign Minister Velayati explained that such a policy "keeps us resistant against foreign influence" without resulting in "seclusion or isolation from today's world."

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*President Khamene'i*

In practice, this policy of nonalignment is unevenly applied, since the United States is reviled uncompromisingly on a daily basis and relations with most West European countries are generally poor. Trade ties with East European countries, by contrast, have been expanding rapidly.

Iran's desire to improve ties with Moscow is reflected in Rafsanjani's statement, reported by IRNA on 7 February 1985, that "we are inclined to have good relations with the Soviets." Though decidedly better than with the United States, Iran's relations with the Soviet Union are clouded by Tehran's support for the Muslim rebels of

Afghanistan and its demands for a Soviet troop withdrawal there, as well as by Moscow's complaints over issues such as Iranian suppression of the Tudeh communist party. Velayati declared in an interview published in the 13 March Rotterdam paper *NRC Handelsblad* that "good-neighborly relations do not mean we will set aside our principles with regard to the Afghanistan question."

To some extent Iran's increasing ties with the Third World have been driven by its poor relations with the West and perceptions of Western hostility to its purposes. According to IRNA, Prime Minister Musavi reminded the Iranian ambassadors gathered in Tehran on 23 October 1984 that "if we forget the deep-rooted animosity of the West and industrialized world against the Islamic revolution for a minute, then we will lose our path." He concluded: "Iran attaches particular significance to the establishment of extensive political relations with the Third World and especially African countries."

These perceptions of Western hostility translate directly in Iranian public statements into claims of a special affinity with Third World countries that Tehran believes endure similar exploitation by the West. President Khamene'i stressed this theme, for example, in a Friday prayers sermon on 1 February: "We feel sympathetic toward and accept as one of us any nation in the world which is suffering under the scourge of global arrogance." Such sympathies

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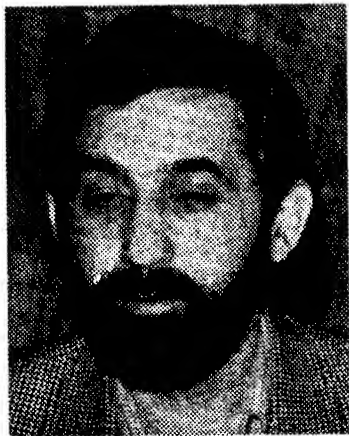
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have been expressed particularly in the course of efforts to strengthen relations with African nations. Speaking to a special envoy from Benin on 22 December 1984, for example, Khamene'i said that "the two nations of Iran and Benin have suffered from similar pains, and this is sufficient for us to solve your problems."

Building on these themes, Iran ideologically justifies its preference for expanding Third World relations as a means to counter what it views as economic exploitation by Western nations. A 27 February 1985 Tehran radio commentary explained: "Now that we wish to establish relations with the world and establish trade exchanges, would it not be better for us to come closer to our neighbors, to the Afro-Asian countries? Why should the superpowers take our oil and why should our money be poured into the banks of the world's guzzlers?"

As a part of this policy, Iranian officials have promoted the idea of creating a Third World force economically independent of the superpowers. As reported by Tehran radio on 13 December 1984, Minister of Heavy Industries Behzad Nabavi told the Turkish minister of communications, for example, that "if we Muslim countries can develop our industries through our own efforts to such a point that they become strong enough to withstand the onslaught of Western industries, we would be doing something effective."

While pursuing this objective, Tehran has at the same time displayed an awareness of the shortcomings of focusing single-mindedly on the Third



Foreign Minister Velayati

World. In a 2 December 1984 interview published in the Tehran daily *Keyhan*, Foreign Minister Velayati, while noting that "increased economic exchanges with a country enhances our political ties," pointed to the practical limitations of such a trade policy. He explained that despite ideological considerations, it is sometimes justifiable to import goods from Western industrialized nations when it appears that Third World countries are unable to produce goods of comparable quality or at competitive prices. Velayati argued that "public funds used to purchase needed material for the country . . . should not be spent on low-quality goods." "We must be careful that due to political considerations our warehouses do not become full of worthless goods," he said.

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A generally unfulfilled political objective of Iran's Third World diplomacy has been to gain support for its side in the Gulf war. Although Tehran has generally succeeded in retaining Syrian and Libyan support, it has had little success elsewhere in the Arab world or in the Third World at large.² Benin and North Korea are unusual in having expressed such support, but otherwise Iran's statements on its position—that Iraq was the initial aggressor, for example—have not been met with statements of sympathy.

Relations With Islamic Countries

Speaking at a seminar of Iran's ambassadors to Arab and African countries on 20 February, Velayati, according to IRNA, "stressed the role of Islam in linking Arab and Islamic countries" and in making them the most natural part of the Third World for Iran to expand its economic and political ties. This frequently expressed policy of the Foreign Ministry conflicts, however, with the revolutionary outlook of other Iranian leaders who have sharply criticized relations with some Islamic governments.

For example, in a 9 February address to foreign guests in Qom reported by IRNA, Ayatollah Hoseyn Ali Montazeri, Khomeyni's probable successor as supreme political-religious authority, criticized the heads of unspecified Islamic countries "for having become overly subservient to the major powers of the West and the East" and for contributing to keeping President Saddam Husayn in power in Baghdad. He also warned that Muslims have the strength to liberate such Islamic countries and to "dump their leaders on the rubbish heap of history," and he added that the United States could no more help them than it was able to rescue the shah.

President Khamene'i has leveled even more direct criticism at governments in Islamic Asia and Africa, whose peoples he described in a Friday prayers sermon on 9 February as being "the dupes and playthings of the deviations and love of comfort of their governments." He promised support for Islamic revolutionary movements in those countries, though his remarks suggested defensiveness over the possibility that such support might be considered meddling. "Our constitution has warned us against interfering in the affairs of other countries, but supporting the movements of those nations suffering under the jackboots of world colonialism—this we do not consider interference," he

² President Khamene'i's September 1984 tour of Arab capitals, which yielded mixed results in securing support against Iraq, is discussed in the FBIS *Trends* of 19 September 1984, pages 3-6.

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stated. Khamene'i has presented Iran's current diplomatic efforts as a useful means to this end. On 19 February he told a group of Iranian ambassadors to Arab and African countries that countering the "region's reactionaries . . . can be achieved by expanding relations with the countries of the world."

Export of Revolution

Iranian leaders view the export of Islamic revolution modeled on their own experience as a fundamental mission. In a speech on the subject on 30 October 1984, Rafsanjani said that "no one can conceal or intend to conceal the export of the Islamic revolution." He made clear, however, that the idea of such export was "to convey the message of the revolution, which is the message of Islam." More recently, Foreign Minister Velayati, as reported by Tehran radio on 4 March, explained at a seminar of cultural attachés that a central objective of Iran's foreign policy is the export of the Islamic revolution, which he defined as "acquainting the people of the world with the values and concepts of the Islamic revolution."

The Tehran leadership maintains that the image of Iran and its revolution abroad is distorted by the hostile propaganda of nations that fear the spread of



Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani

Islamic revolution. Iranian leaders often complain that their revolution is characterized as a dangerous threat that Iran intends to export by terrorism and force rather than as a movement of potentially great popular appeal. Rafsanjani told a gathering of Iranian diplomats on 26 February that "the principal task of the Islamic government and its ambassadors and Foreign Ministry envoys abroad is to wipe out misconceptions and wrongful attitudes created in the minds of the world's people by oppressive governments disvaluing religion and dismissing its potential for mobilizing the masses."

Iranian leaders express confidence that the revolution will be an inspiration to others, particularly in Islamic lands, if its image is properly presented. Declaring that "we are the trailblazers of an Islamic movement," Rafsanjani stated on 15 February that "our Islamic revolution is not an ordinary movement limited by our borders." Khamene'i declared on

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9 February that Iranians must nurture such movements: "The seed of this revolution has not only been sown in Iran but in all Islamic lands, and the Islamic revolution must be properly cultivated so that it can flourish in all Muslim lands."

Iranian leaders have been publicly vague about the specific nature of their support for other Islamic movements. Perhaps the most explicit comment in this regard was made by Rafsanjani in an address reported in the 23 January Tehran daily *Keyhan*. Observing that "any revolution that takes place in the world relies on and places its hope in the Islamic Republic of Iran," he declared that "today we support the Muslim people of Lebanon, Afghanistan, the Sahara, Eritrea, and others, and our boys are fighting today against Israel in Lebanon."

Iran has declared its support for Muslim movements in Lebanon, both Shi'ite and Sunni.³ It claims that Iran's Islamic revolution has been a source of inspiration for popular resistance against Israel, and it credits Muslim rather than national resistance with the current withdrawal of the Israeli forces from South Lebanon. Rafsanjani said on 9 February that what was happening there was taking place "with inspiration from us" and called Lebanon "a sign of Iran's victory beyond its own borders." Ayatollah Montazeri on 18 February declared his support for the establishment of an Islamic government in Lebanon.

Reflecting an awareness of the concern expressed by other nations that Iran contemplates more forceful means to achieve its goals, Rafsanjani on 31 October 1984 rejected the idea that revolution would be imposed on others, saying "the principle of 'no duress in religion' is accepted by all Muslims as an immutable principle. But within this framework we have always declared that we do not wish to keep our ideas to ourselves."

Iranian leaders have repeatedly rejected foreign allegations that the export of revolution involves terrorist methods. In a 3 February 1985 address on the "Ten Days of Dawn" anniversary of the Islamic revolution, for example, Ayatollah Khomeyni responded to such charges, saying "they are lying." "Iran is against all such acts," he said, adding that "we have no need to resort to terrorism." Khomeyni countercharged that "actually those who oppose us are committing terrorism," calling the United States a "country that has set the whole world ablaze."

³ For more on this topic see FBIS *Analysis Note* FB M 85-10010 of 20 March 1985, "Iranian Support for Muslims of Lebanon."

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The Tehran leadership has carefully avoided portraying its revolution as relevant only to the Shi'ite sect of Islam and has sought to avoid sectarian issues in its relations with other Islamic countries. In a 14 December 1984 speech to clergymen broadcast by Tehran radio, Rafsanjani warned of Muslim discord and stressed that "differences between Muslims can be easily eliminated." He claimed that such discord is encouraged by the "imperialists" to prevent the spread of the Islamic revolution: "The Persian Gulf—this jugular of the world economy—is in the hands of followers of Islam but the enemy tries to capitalize on every pretext to create differences between Muslims."

In recent months Iran has portrayed its revolution as a model for Christian nations as well. On 2 February, for example, Prime Minister Musavi said he had learned during his January visit to Nicaragua that "Iran's Islamic and revolutionary movement has even shaken the world of Christianity," adding that "the principal essence of the Islamic revolution was the merger of religion and politics."

Debate Over Diplomatic Ties

The question of whether to establish or maintain diplomatic relations with foreign governments—as opposed to Tehran's traditional stress on revolutionary ties with foreign "peoples"—has been the subject of a prolonged domestic debate that may have been resolved only recently with the passage of a Majlis bill defining the role of the Foreign Ministry.

Khomeyni in his speech to Iran's diplomatic corps on 28 October last year rejected the view that ties should be made only with peoples rather than governments. He said that certain unnamed foreign policy critics "are up to more mischief, asking why we should have relations with other governments," and called this a "fresh and very dangerous plot." Recalling how in the early days of Islam the prophet Mohammad had "sent ambassadors to all parts of the world to establish proper relations," he said it is "inadmissible to common sense and to humanity that we should have no relations with other governments" and added: "My advice to you is to strengthen relations wherever and in whatever country you are." According to IRNA, Ayatollah Montazeri the next day "reaffirmed" Khomeyni's stand that "Iranian diplomats abroad should strengthen their contacts with governments."

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Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani, however, in a speech reported by Tehran radio on 31 October, reconstructed Khomeyni's remarks in an apparent attempt to rescue the position Khomeyni had denounced. In statements "aimed at clarifying the remarks of the imam," he said that the issues Khomeyni raised "should be commented on by those who have a greater understanding of his statements." Claiming that the "spirit of the issue" was really the export of the principles of the Islamic revolution, he said: "Our adversaries are the bullying governments. We have no quarrel with the wronged governments. We speak to and with the peoples and we raise issues with them."

A front-page editorial in the Tehran daily *Jomhuri Eslami* on 5 December 1984 gave further voice to opponents of diplomatic contacts by complaining that Iranian foreign policy's "basic goal, which is relations with nations, is overshadowed by what is only a means toward that—that is, relations with governments." Former Prime Minister Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani, now head of an important association of clerics, attempted to lay the issue to rest a few days later in his sermon as temporary Friday prayers leader, in which he reaffirmed Khomeyni's remarks. As reported by *Ettela'at* on 9 December 1984, he said that the business of the Foreign Ministry is to have relations with governments and not just with other peoples. "The imam commanded that we must not be isolated," he recalled, "and we must do nothing that would make us isolated in the world."

In an interview published in the Tehran daily *Ettela'at* on 17 December 1984, Prime Minister Musavi tried to reconcile Iran's formal diplomatic contacts with the position of those critics who maintain that many governments, particularly in the Islamic world, do not represent their people and that therefore having relations with such governments conflicts with the principles of the Islamic revolution and lessens its popular appeal to other nations. Recognizing that only "a very small number of the governments of the world are in harmony with their people," he stressed that "the important point is that in these relations we must not become involved in a lack of homogeneity" between governments and people. He described relations with governments as a means to achieving the long-range goal of spreading the message of the revolution.

Ministry Role Redefined

In an apparent effort to resolve some of these foreign policy issues, the Majlis on 14 February 1985 passed a bill specifying the duties of the Foreign

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Ministry, in the process curtailing the ministry's role in policymaking. As reported in the 16 February *Ettela'at* and other Tehran dailies, Article One states that "the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for carrying out the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran"—in effect emphasizing the ministry's role as executor of policies set by the leadership and the Majlis. As reported by *Keyhan* and *Jomhuri Eslami* on 16 February, Foreign Minister Velayati unsuccessfully argued for an amendment that would have enabled the "government" to determine the general framework of foreign policy, based on the constitution and the guidance of the leadership. The bill strengthens the power of the Majlis and its speaker, Rafsanjani, and suggests that Majlis debates may make it even more difficult to identify a clear direction in foreign policy.

With respect to the debate over the object of Iran's foreign policy, however, the language of the bill clearly charges the ministry with dealing with other governments. Article Two, for example, lists its duties as "studying, establishing, adjusting, preserving, and expanding the political relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran with other governments and international organizations." At the same time, Article Four gives the Foreign Ministry a revolutionary mission, apparently seeking to accommodate both those who wish to maintain proper international relations and those who want to officially make the ministry a means for coordinating the support of revolutionary movements in other nations:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should support the struggles of oppressed people, especially Muslims, for their rights against the oppressors in all parts of the world, without interfering in the affairs of other nations, based on the goals and foreign policy of the country and in coordination with other related organizations.

